

**National Association of County
Veterans Service Officers**

Testimony of
F. Douglas LeValley, Past-President

before the

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Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and
Memorial Affairs

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National Association of

County Veterans Service Officers

Introduction

Chairman Hall, members of the Subcommittee, it is truly my honor to be able to present this testimony before you. As Past-President of the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers, I am commenting on:

- National Association of County Veterans Service Officers (NACVSO) views on H.R. 67, Veterans Outreach Improvement Act of 2007.
- NACVSO views on H.R. 1435, Department of Veterans affairs Claims Backlog Reduction Act of 2007.
- NACVSO views on H.R. 1444, To direct the Secretary of Veterans affairs to make interim benefit payments under certain remanded claims, and for other purposes.
- NACVSO views on H.R. 1490, To provide for presumption of service-connectedness for certain claims for benefits under laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

The National Association of County Veterans Service Officers is an organization made up of local government employees. Our members are tasked with assisting veterans in developing and processing their claims. Between 75 and 90% of the claims presented to the Veterans Administration each year originate in a county veterans office. Our

members sit across from those men and women who wish to file a claim each day. They are our friends and neighbors members of our communities whom we see often daily. We exist to serve veterans and partner with the National Service Organizations and the Department of Veterans Affairs to serve veterans. Our Association focuses on outreach, standardized quality training, and claims development and advocacy. We are extension or arm of government, not unlike the VA itself in service to the nation's veterans and their dependents.

H.R. 67, Veterans Outreach Improvement Act of 2007:

The outreach that I will address is the hands on approach. Across our nation there are veterans that do not think they are a veteran because they did not lose a limb or get injured in anyway. They came home and started to work to support their families. They have never looked for any help from the government. When the veteran dies their families still do not know they are entitled to benefits just because their husband or father served his country. These are the people that need outreach. They are mostly lower income and have never reached out to the VA and therefore they don't think they are entitled to this help.

I look at rural and urban America and see the great need to make these veterans aware of the benefits that they deserve, that are earned entitlement not welfare. These veterans have never made use of the VAMC's, the GI Bill, Home Loan, Pension or Compensation Benefits. They just served their country and came home. It is so rewarding when you meet one of these veterans and tell them what they may be entitled to and see the hope on their face. It sometimes means the difference in eating or buying medicine. I am sure if a

study was completed you would see a large number of rural veterans have never used the VA for any service and did not know they could. The VA has a responsibility to reach out and make everyone aware of their entitlement. One of the ways is for the County Veterans Service Officer to spread the word. To go into the communities with the message those veterans and their dependents have benefits due them. While many counties do fund a County Veteran Service Officer, the vast majority do not provide funding for outreach and other informational services.

Outreach efforts must be expanded in order to reach those veterans, dependents and survivors that are unaware of their benefits and to bring them into the system. Nearly 2 million poor Veterans or their impoverished widows are likely missing out on as much as \$22 billion a year in pensions from the U.S. government, but the Department of Veterans Affairs has had only limited success in finding them, according to the North Carolina Charlotte Observer.

Widows are hardest hit. According to the VA's own estimate, **only one in seven** of the survivors of the nation's deceased Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines who likely could qualify for the pension actually get the monthly checks. What's more, participation in the program is falling. **Veterans and widows are unaware that the program exists.** They simply don't know about it and the VA knows that many are missing out on the benefit "We obviously are here for any veteran or survivor who qualifies," said a VA Pension official. **"But so many of these people -- we don't know who they are, where they are."** The VA's own report from late 2004 recommended that the agency "improve its outreach efforts" with public service announcements and other pilot programs. While

it made limited efforts to reach veterans or their widows through existing channels, it is difficult to determine whether such efforts have been successful.

Of all those likely eligible, only 27 percent of veterans and 14 percent of widows receive the money. It is obvious that there is a great need for outreach to into the veteran's community and the local CVSO is the advocate closest to the veterans and widows and with minimal funding could reach the maximum number of eligible veterans and widows. Therefore, NACVSO is supporting H.R.67, introduced by Congressman Mike McIntyre of North Carolina, that would allow Secretary Nicholson to provide federal – state – local grants and assistance to state and county veteran's service officers to enhance outreach to veterans and their dependents. We are already present in most communities and stand ready to assist the Department of Veterans affairs with this monumental task.

H.R. 1435, Department of Veterans Affairs Claims Backlog Reduction Act of 2007:

In June of 2002 the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers (NACVSO) offered testimony before the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Benefits. The testimony was centered on the backlog or inventory of veteran's claims for their earned benefits. At that time the NACVSO testified, the inventory of veteran's claims was approximately 525,000 claims. Currently the inventory continues to grow and now stands more than 851,000 claims. This inventory causes a wait, in some cases, of more than one year. During the testimony of 2002, President George Hunt stated that many veterans have died while waiting for their claims to be adjudicated. He went on to state; "Dying while Waiting" is not acceptable for the men and women who placed

themselves in harm's way for our great nation.” Nearly five years later, the inventory problem is worse and it is still not acceptable for our veterans to die while waiting for their “earned” benefits.

As we prepare this testimony there are approximately 25 million honorably discharged veterans of the armed forces of the United States. These men and women served honorably and expect a grateful nation to keep the promises that were made to them upon their entry onto active duty. A large percentage of those veterans are over the age of 70. It is the responsibility of the United States Government to live up to its promises that were made and accepted in good faith. Those promises that include medical care and compensation for illnesses and wounds sustained in the defense of freedom. A mechanism must be developed so that we have the means and the ability to serve these most deserving of our citizens....those that have safeguarded our rights and freedoms that so many take for granted.

Our members, County Veteran Service Officers (CVSO), are present in 37 of our 50 states and located in over 700 local communities. This readily available workforce represents approximately 2,400 full time employees who are available to partner with Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Defense and the Department of Labor to help speed the process of claims development and transition of our military personnel to civilian life. H.R. 1435, sponsored by Congressman Baca of California, provides a way for the Department of Veterans affairs to enlist the aid of these CVSO's in a pilot program, beginning in five states. CVSO's, through the claimants powers of attorney, would fully develop, as many as possible, claims passed from the local VA Regional Office. Thereby assisting in reducing the claims backlog by returning fully developed

ready to rate claims. The availability of approximately 2,400 trained, full time CVSO's available to work at the local level developing claims will free up VA personnel for other task. NACVSO supports the pilot program of H.R. 1435 and believe that its success will cause the Secretary of Veterans affairs to expand the program into other states.

H.R. 1444, To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to make interim benefits payments under certain remanded claims, and for other purposes:

The backlog of remanded claims continues to be a problem for the veteran and H.R. 1444, sponsored by Congressman Hall of New York provides relief for any veteran having a claim remanded for more than 180 days with out a decision. While some remands continue for over a year the financial burden upon the veteran becomes unbearable. NACVSO supports the payment of interim benefits of \$500.00 per month to each claimant as a temporary solution to the remand backlog until the Secretary of Veterans Affairs can provide suitable measures to process remands in a timely manor.

H.R. 1490, To provide for a presumption of service-connection for certain claims for benefits under the laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans affairs, and for other purposes:

NACVSO supports H.R. 1490, sponsored by Congressman Donnelly that provides for presumption of service-connection for claims filed by combat veterans.

Under this proposal processing of claims would become simpler and the addition of online application could reduce the present 177 day for an initial claim to a manageable period thus allowing combat veterans to be better served.

CONCLUSION:

This concludes my comments.

I am ready to answer any questions the committee may have.

Thank you.